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ABSTRACT

A student's fear of giving oral reports and the instructor's objection to using too much class time on oral reports are often seen as the major barriers that prevent an oral communication unit from being included in a business or management communications course. One approach to easing both concerns is the use of videotaping as a self-discovery technique. The planning, taping, and reviewing of the tapes may require about 15 hours per semester, but only 3 or 4 of those 15 hours need be actual class time. The subject of the oral reports can overlap with a writing assignment in which students are required to write abstracts of articles that deal with specific communication skills. Students should be told in advance that one of their articles will be the basis for an oral report, which is a three- to five-minute presentation giving a short personal reaction. The oral report is videotaped and evaluated by presenter and peers, but is neither evaluated nor graded by the instructor. As the students come to realize that the videotape captures their entire effort, they see and discover patterns that no amount of oral or written criticism could possibly communicate. Free from a concern about grades, students can cope with their fear and focus on those characteristics necessary for an effective oral report. (HOD)

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IMPROVING ORAL REPORTS: A HEURISTIC APPROACH

Paper presented at the Eastern Regional Meeting of the
American Business Communication Association
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Improving Oral Reports: A Heuristic Approach

Introduction

Fear and time - the students' fear of giving oral reports and our objection to using too much class time on oral reports - loom as the major barriers which often prevent an oral communications unit from being included in a business or management communications course. Yet, we know that the students are ill-prepared, that the skills are needed, and that experience is essential.

Students are often so fearful of giving oral reports that they concentrate all their energies on merely getting through the ordeal. They do not know precisely what they have said nor how well or poorly they have said it. Many students fidget, tap, and twiddle without realizing their annoying actions. Others read rapidly through their presentations, never looking at the audience; some may glance painfully at the audience. Often students lose command of voice, tone, and pacing. Fear can manifest pathetic behavior.

Surveys of students taking my Professional Communications course indicate that oral reports are their greatest concern. Students have often indicated they would willingly write additional long reports rather than give even one oral report. A police officer enrolled in an evening section of my course once confessed: "I'd rather be facing a man with a gun than give an oral report." The number one fear on the list of "The 14 Worst Human Fears" is speaking before a group.[1] Oral reports cause more fear than snakes!

We must help students to cope with this fear so they can concentrate on improving their quality of performance and communicating

a message.

While we have convinced ourselves that we can do little to help students control their fear, we may also feel that we can eliminate our concern for time by simply not including oral reports in our courses. R. S. Kellner, in a recent article, in the ABCA Bulletin expressed concern over the inordinate amount of time given over to oral presentations in business and technical communications courses.[2] Many of us share this concern.

Professor Kellner also notes:

> No one denies the importance of oral communications in industry.
>
> Students certainly do need to practice oral presentation. But most colleges have separate courses and even separate departments in speech, and speech instructors are better prepared than writing teachers to help the students achieve oral competency.[3]

Perhaps so, but most of my students cannot fit an additional course into their programs. So, while I don't wish to take too much time away from writing, the primary focus of my course, I must allow a limited time for oral reports.

Besides, oral communication skills are traditionally included in a business or management communications course. For example, Herbert W. Hildebrandt, in conducting a survey among recently promoted vice presidents, presidents, and CEO's concerning the importance of specific courses in a business administration program, defined business communication as "oral and written

communication" in his questionnaire.[4] Incidentally, the executives gave the course so defined "the highest mean score (1.357) on a scale of one (very important) to five (very unimportant)."[5]

Therefore, to ease both concerns of fear and time, I suggest videotaping used as a self-discovery technique. If students are taped in an environment relatively free of formal evaluation, they can concentrate on coping with fear and discovering for themselves the characteristics of quality presentations. The planning, taping, and reviewing of the tapes may require about 15 hours per semester, but only 3 or 4 of those 15 hours need be actual class time.

Assignment

The subject of the oral reports overlaps with a writing assignment in which I require students to write abstracts of articles that deal with specific communication skills, e.g., effective report writing, listening, improving diction, varying writing styles, overcoming barriers to effective communication. During the first six weeks of the semester, students select and abstract five 1500 to 2000 word articles written during the last two years that focus on specific communications topics. I announce the topic for each abstract and approve the selections in order to avoid duplications, tell students in advance that one of their articles will be the basis for an oral report, and urge them to retain a copy of each article and to take thorough and accurate notes.

Using the articles for both abstracts and oral reports offers several advantages:

1. Students must research library materials to find articles, thus enhancing research skills;
2. Students usually read or scan several articles before selecting those to be abstracted;
3. Abstracting skills and general writing skills are augmented;
4. Students frequently select excellent articles and these, of course, are shared with the class during presentations;
5. Articles that are well organized and meaty relieve the student from concerns about what to say and how to say it.

The oral report itself is a three to five minute presentation during which the student:

1. gives full documentation of the article;
2. summarizes and explains key points;
3. offers a short personal reaction or critique.

The five abstracts are read, evaluated, and graded; the oral report is videotaped, evaluated by presenter and peers, but is neither evaluated nor graded by me. A simple check (✓) in my grade book notes fulfillment of this course requirement. Thus, with this assignment I have limited the time involved; eased the students' burden of information and format; removed concern over a grade; given them a part of another necessary experience, namely self-evaluation.

Procedure

At the beginning of the semester, while explaining the videotaping requirement, I spend approximately 15 minutes discussing the characteristics of an effective presentation: strong introduction, control of voice and tone, appropriate body movements and gestures, awareness of audience through eye contact and flow of information, and of course, organization.

Also, at the beginning of the semester, students submit a copy of their class schedules and indicate their free time; they are then assigned to groups of 4 to 6 according to common free time. I schedule five 50 minute videotaping sessions for the first eight weeks of the semester. Taping is not done during class time. (Note the sample class schedule.)

Although videotaping equipment is easy to use and taping can be done almost anywhere, I prefer to have a Monroe Community College technician tape my students in one of the MCC TV studios. The quality of the taping seems better; the environment can be more easily controlled.

The studio is arranged so that the camera, recording equipment, and monitor are near the back and a lectern and perhaps chalkboard are in front. Several chairs facing the lectern are placed between the videotaping equipment and the lectern.

When the students arrive for their taping session, I announce the individual taping order and then spend four or five minutes trying to get them to relax. Initially, the monitor is adjusted

SAMPLE SCHEDULE

	MONDAY	WEDNESDAY	FRIDAY
1st Week		Discuss videotaping requirement and oral reports (15 minutes)	Assign abstract #1 (due in one week)
2nd Week	Collect students' schedules; establish taping dates and times*		Assign abstract #2 (due in one week); Assign oral report for group #1 (to be taped during the 3rd week*)
3rd Week			Assign abstract #3 (due in one week); Assign oral report for group #2 (to be taped during the 4th week*)
4th Week	Review tape of group #1		Assign abstract #4 (due in one week); Assign oral report for group #3 (to be taped during the 5th week*)
5th Week	Review tape of group #2		Assign abstract #5 (due in one week); Assign oral report for group #4 (to be taped during the 6th week*)
6th Week	Review tape of group #3		Assign oral report for group #5 (to be taped during the 7th week*)
7th Week	Review tape of group #4		
8th Week	Review tape of group #5		

*PLANNING, SCHEDULING, AND TAPING ARE DONE OUTSIDE OF CLASS TIME

SAMPLE SCHEDULE

	MONDAY	WEDNESDAY	FRIDAY
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2ND Week	Collect students' schedules; establish taping dates and times.*		Assign abstract #2 (due in one week). Assign oral report for group #1 (to be taped during the 3rd week*)
3RD Week			Assign abstract #3 (due in one week). Assign oral report for group #2 (to be taped during the 4th week*)
4TH Week	Review tape of group #1		Assign abstract #4 (due in one week). Assign oral report for group #3 (to be taped during the 5th week*)

* Planning, scheduling, and taping are done outside of class time.

so that the screen can be seen from the lectern. The students stand at the lectern and watch themselves in the monitor. They can examine and play with the equipment. Since very few students have had this experience before, the atmosphere seems a curious combination of tension and good cheer.

Then, the monitor is turned so that the screen cannot be seen from the lectern and the first student begins. Then, I leave, but before I leave the studio, I remind the technician to vary the camera shots, i.e., use long shots, close ups, and catch the audience (students waiting to give reports) occasionally. At the end of the session, if time permits, students may review their performances. The tape is considered by the entire class during the next regular class meeting.

I used to remain in the studio during each taping, but my presence seemed to have an unsettling effect on the students and they, of course, associated me with evaluation.

When I use the tape in class, I show one performance at a time, stopping after each for responses. I allow the performer to comment first. Class members comment or question next; although I may ask some neutral questions, I don't comment or judge at all. Keeping quiet remains a difficult but crucial part of this procedure.

Students in group one when reviewing their own performances often laugh, giggle, or express embarrassment in some other way: they might say that they looked funny or dumb, they sounded nervous or weak, they kept looking down or kept tapping a finger or foot.

They hardly ever mention the message. Classmates, however, offer support, perhaps out of empathy.

From group two on, students viewing themselves remain highly self-critical, but their criticism seems more detailed and realistic. They focus on organization, awareness of audience, tone, use of details, body movements, and control of nervousness.

For this procedure to work, I know I must carefully organize the assignment, control the taping, and avoid evaluative comments. I do answer questions, encourage comments from students, offer suggestions, but I try to avoid judgmental words or phrases. I let the students evaluate themselves thus discovering those competencies that we, the professionals, consider significant.

This total procedure can be accomplished by using no more than 3 to 4 hours of class time (25 students per class). Students may expect to spend approximately six hours completing the entire assignment:

a) selecting, reading, and abstracting an article - 2 to 3 hours;

b) preparing for and practicing their presentation - 2 hours;

c) videotaping the presentation - 1 hour.

Results

The results of this approach are cumulative. Some have already been stated or may be inferred in earlier sections of this article.

The class will probably review the tape of the first group at

the beginning of the fourth week of classes. Although students know one another, their relationships at that time remain staid and perhaps somewhat formal. So, in response to the first set of performances, which are usually weak, the students remain casual, politely attentive, reticent, and circumspect. The class will offer vapid and innocuous comments about general appearance, volume, clarity, and organization. The comments, although not very helpful or detailed, are at least positive and supportive.

Group two may offer few improvements in performance, but the comments from peers become more exacting: "You didn't seem to care"; "Your introduction didn't grab me"; "I couldn't follow you"; "You were believable because you smiled"; "Did you dress especially for the taping?" "A chart would help me to focus on your main points."

Subsequent groups improve perceptively! Students begin to note the subtle elements: levels of enthusiasm, voice quality, effective transition, supporting detail, gestures that contradict words, ambiguous tones, strong or weak diction, pacing, effective juncture, elements of control, presence, self confidence.

Observations and comments during the course, as well as evaluations at the end of the course, yield several encouraging points. Although many students resist the idea of videotaping initially, at the end of the semester, they praise it as one of the best educational experiences they have gone through. Several comments concern the need for careful, detailed preparation and much practice before the taping. Many students wish they could

"try it again." They remark about a reduction of fear and an enhancement of confidence; they comment about the positive atmosphere and supportive comments of peers.

Also, grooming and dress change as subsequent groups are taped; whereas students in the first group might wear typical college students' clothing, later groups dress up: women in skirts or dresses and men in suits or sport coats. They seem to prepare themselves as well as their notes.

Students come to realize that the videotape captures their entire effort; they see and discover patterns that no amount of oral or written criticism could possibly communicate. So, free from a concern about grades, they seem able to cope with their fear and focus on those characteristics necessary for an effective oral report.

ENDNOTES

[1]Wallechinsky, D., Wallace I., and Wallace, A., The Book of Lists, Bantam, New York, 1977, p. 469.

[2]Kellner, R. S., "The Degeneration of Technical Writing: A Question of Teacher Competency," ABCA Bulletin, September 1982, pp. 5-10.

[3]Kellner, p. 9.

[4]Hildebrandt, Herbert W., "Executive Choice: Business Communication, Journal of Communication Management, Vol. II, No. 4, 1982, pp. 8-11.

[5]Hildebrandt, p. 8.